

The Future of Palestinian Diplomatic Activism in the Trump Era

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The developments during the early months of 2017 show that the Palestinian Authority (PA) continues to prefer to express its opposition to Israeli policy through diplomatic means, including attempts to promote stronger international pressure on Israel. This is in line with the policy led by Mahmoud Abbas since the very beginning of his tenure. He recently elucidated the importance of this policy in a special speech he delivered to mark the fifty-second anniversary of the Fatah movement.

Mahmoud Abbas espouses the diplomatic struggle and the recruiting of international support for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the basis of the 1967 borders. His consistent stance is that institutionalized violent struggle harms Palestinian interests. United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2334, which was adopted at the end of 2016 and states that the settlements are illegal, encourages the PA to continue this policy and continue to view the diplomatic path as the central element of its comprehensive strategy.

However, this strategy now faces a number of challenges following the rise of the Trump administration and the new winds blowing in the White House, as well as several regional changes: the growing Russian involvement in the Middle East, and Russia's signals to the PA and Islamic factions that it is ready to take a more active role in the intra-Palestinian arena. This article describes and analyzes these challenges, and points to the possible courses of action open to the PA.

The Trump administration and the Palestinians

Due to the recent reshuffling in the White House, the new American administration seems inclined to isolationist policy and unwilling to invest much effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, there is little likelihood for a resumption of the peace process under American sponsorship in the near future.

The initial steps taken by the Trump administration testify to the creation of an iron curtain between the US and part of the Arab world. In the very first two weeks of his tenure, President Trump signed an executive order barring the US from giving entrance visas to the residents of Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia. The PA leadership, which constitutes part of the Arab world, must also view this step as a tacit threat to itself. This is because some Palestinian fractions – the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements, which want to join the PLO – deal with financing and initiating terror acts.

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As part of the lessons learned from the Arafat era, in which violence was encouraged and used as a political tool – Mahmoud Abbas wants to change the way Palestinians are viewed by Western eyes. Instead of Palestinians being viewed as peace rejectionists who adopt violence as what they think is a legitimate tool, Abbas wants them to be viewed as a nation searching for a diplomatic solution for its national tribulations, while receiving support from the global community. The asymmetric nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the recognition of Israel's military superiority, requires the PA leadership to focus on diplomatic tools in their struggle. In the Trump era, the Palestinians are likely to try and carry out their diplomatic struggle with the support of international actors – such as key European countries and UN judicial institutions – that can somehow counterbalance and curb the policies of the American administration.

The PA's diplomatic struggle and the Islamic opposition

Resolution 2334 is one of the salient Palestinian diplomatic achievements in the Obama era. This resolution was warmly received by the PLO. More surprising was that it also drew positive reactions from Hamas and Islamic Jihad members, despite the fact that the resolution supports the two-state solution; calls for continued security coordination between Israel and the PA; and is vague regarding if and how pressure will actually be placed on Israel.

The Islamic Jihad and Hamas are currently conducting talks with the Fatah leadership regarding the possibility of joining PLO institutions. Supporting Mahmoud Abbas' diplomatic struggle can help them get closer to achieving this goal. In this context, one can also understand the change in tactical discourse that is taking place in the leadership of Hamas' political wing, and their increasing willingness to call for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the June 4, 1967 lines. Such opinions have been voiced in the past by Khaled Meshaal, and are also heard now. The key figure doing so is Hamas representative in Lebanon Osama Hamdan. This discourse is a source of tension between the leaders of the military and political wings of the Hamas movement. We must keep in mind that Hamas' military leadership, which is mainly concentrated in the Gaza Strip, has a more central role than the movement's political leadership in shaping reality on the ground.

The current efforts for rapprochement between the various Palestinian factions is influenced by several factors. First of all, the factions are worried about the ramifications of the change of guard in Washington and the fact that the Trump administration is expected to adopt a new Middle East policy. Second of all, they recognize their weaknesses vis-à-vis the Palestinian public, which is sick and tired of inner dissension and does not view the current Fatah and Hamas leaderships as being capable of resolving the public's hardships.

The new American administration does not bode well for the Palestinians. During the election campaign, Trump issued statements that he would give Israel a green light to expand settlements and that he would relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He also appointed a right-wing ambassador to Israel (David Friedman) who supports the settlement enterprise. All these actions aroused deep suspicion among the Palestinians. Even if Trump will not carry through on the embassy relocation, due to the sensitivity of the subject and concern over the great anger it would arouse in the Arab world – the very fact that the President supports such an idea teaches the Palestinians that they do not have a friend in the White House.

The Russian option

One of the paths taken by the PA to protest the emerging American policy, was to accept a Russian invitation to attend a summit with all the Palestinian factions in Moscow in January 2017. The close ties between the PLO and Russia are natural, as they are based on a positive historic relationship. The socialist and Marxist factions within the PLO enjoy an ideological-historical affinity to the Russians. These groups include: The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); and the Palestinian People's Party (PPP; communists). Mahmoud Abbas himself had been closely aligned with the Russian regime for many years. It was in Moscow that Abbas wrote his controversial doctorate. Also, Abbas served as chairman of the Russia-PLO Friendship Association for many years.

The goal of the discussions held between the Palestinian factions under the Russian umbrella was to try to promote an internal Palestinian reconciliation, and an actual timetable for its implementation. Following the summit in Moscow, Fatah and Hamas reached a new agreement about conducting municipal elections in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in mid-May 2017. The discussions regarding the elections dates were held simultaneously with laborious talks between the various factions that attempted to create a formula for reforming the PLO's political structure and integrating Islamic elements in PLO institutions.

But the growing Palestinian rapprochement with Russia does not only focus on attempts to achieve internal Palestinian reconciliation. It also serves to exert pressure on Israel and diminish US prestige in the region. Thus, the PA is sending out two messages, one to Russia and one to the US. They are telling Russia that the Palestinians are willing to give Russia a role in their internal reconciliation process; and they are sending a message to the US regarding the way the Israeli-Palestinian peace process should be conducted in the future. Mahmoud Abbas declares at every international forum that he accepts President Putin's invitation to an Abbas-Netanyahu summit in Moscow. He reiterates that he is waiting for an answer from the Israeli government, in order to jump-start the peace process.

The fact that the Palestinians do not view the US as an "honest broker" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, only heightens Abbas' achievement in convincing the Obama administration to refrain from using its veto power to block resolution 2334. It also explains why the Palestinians want to strengthen their Russian connection at this point in time. Another contributory element is the current prevalent viewpoint in the Arab world that Russia is a rising star in the Middle East power configuration, in light of the regional foreign policy failures of the Obama administration.

The tightening relationship between the PA and Russia on the background of the change of government in the US, shows that the Palestinians are trying to tell the Trump administration that there are additional power brokers in the global arena. And, according to the Palestinians, these other entities can counterbalance what they believe will be Trump's pro-Israeli policy.

Russia's involvement in the Middle East is growing and is expressed by the active fighting of Russian forces alongside Assad's regime in Syria against the rebels, and also by Russian provision of advanced weapons to Syria and Iran. This involvement, together with the Palestinian-Russian alliance, creates a sense of Middle East déjà-vu. Are we returning to the diplomatic principles of the Cold War?

In summary

The Palestinians are creating a strategy that takes into account the fact that they currently have no real ability to exert pressure on the US. The seeming rapprochement between the PA and Russia is probably nothing more than a Palestinian flexing of muscles: an expression of protest and an attempt to tarnish the US' regional prestige, if only slightly.

The PA threatens that it will adopt harsh measures should the new American administration do certain actions, such as the relocation of its embassy to Jerusalem. In such an event, Palestinian officials threatened that the PA will close down its diplomatic mission in Washington and withdraw its recognition of Israel. Such a move would, de facto, annul the framework agreement created in the Oslo Accords. However, it does not seem likely that these threats will be carried out.

The PA and the State of Israel are mutually dependent on one another; the relations between the two entities serve many interests on both sides. This is mainly with regard to economic and security issues. This indicates the success of the broad strategic framework erected by the Oslo Accords, even if the agreement has not yet led to realization of the two-state vision. Nevertheless, American policy could put an end to all hopes for diplomatic progress and encourage a change in the status quo in Jerusalem which could lead to an eruption of violence from the Palestinian side.

Thus, the US change of guard presents many challenges to PA leadership, because of the cold shoulder that the Trump administration will probably show the Palestinians; and in light of limited Palestinian ability to affect American policy. President Trump is expected to try and minimize the influence of resolution 2334 on the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, tighten and strengthen the American veto tradition in the Security Council, and block future initiatives advocating sanctions on Israel for expanding the settlements.

Under such a reality, the Palestinian leadership is likely to find itself between a rock and a hard place: between Abbas' diplomatic strategy that renounces violence, and the will of the Palestinian public for a "real fight." And this fight could, in the absence of a diplomatic horizon, lead to a violent struggle with broad-based grass-roots support.

It is likely that Mahmoud Abbas will cope with these developments by attempting to internationalize the conflict. He will lean more and more heavily on Russia, the EU and the UN, hoping that these actors can help the Palestinians vis-à-vis Israel and the US.